Reimagining Naga Identity: Cultural Sustainability amidst Political Stalemate in the 'Indo-Naga' Peace Process

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Abstract: **This paper examines the sustainability of Naga culture and identity amidst the protracted and inconclusive 'Indo-Naga' peace process. Rooted in oral traditions, customary law, clan-based governance, agricultural rituals, and ancestral land relations, Naga identity embodies belonging, autonomy, and resistance. Yet this identity has been continually reshaped by armed struggle, fragmented peace initiatives, and the Indian state's emphasis on sovereignty and territorial integrity. While Nagaland's statehood in 1963 and subsequent agreements, including the Shillong Accord (1975) and the 1997 ceasefire, sought to incorporate the Naga struggle into India's constitutional framework, they largely ignored core concerns for cultural rights and recognition. The 2015 Framework Agreement rekindled hopes but excluded key factions and civil society, deepening fragmentation and stalemate.**

Drawing on qualitative methods – interviews, narrative analysis, and community observation – this study explores how Naga communities navigate cultural uncertainty, understood here as the ambiguity of sustaining and transmitting traditional knowledge amid unresolved conflict, generational change, and globalization. Findings indicate that cultural sustainability is inseparable from the realization of cultural rights, including autonomy in customary governance, control over ancestral land, and freedom to institutionalize indigenous knowledge. The paper argues that safeguarding Naga identity requires more than a political settlement; it demands a peace process grounded in cultural dignity, plural representation, and a genuine effort to decolonize state-Indigenous relations.

Keywords: **Naga identity, cultural sustainability, cultural rights, indigenous people, 'Indo-Naga' peace process, political stalemate.**

I. INTRODUCTION

The 'Indo-Naga' conflict represents a protracted instance of political unrest in postcolonial South Asia, where early twentieth-century assertions of cultural and political difference have evolved into a complex struggle between the Indian state and the Naga people. The 1929 memorandum of the Naga Club addressed to the Simon Commission, requesting that Nagas not be included in the Indian Union, is widely recognized as an early manifestation of Naga political consciousness (Chasie 2005, 253-64). Following Indian independence, the formation of the Naga National Council (NNC), proclamation of Naga independence in 1947, and subsequent armed conflict framed the Naga struggle not merely as a quest for sovereignty but as a defense of a distinctive identity grounded in ancestral land, customary law, clan-based governance, and oral traditions (Baruah 2003, 321-38).

Historically, the conflict has oscillated between militarization, ceasefires, and political negotiations. State initiatives such as the creation of Nagaland in 1963 and the signing of the Shillong Accord in 1975 attempted to integrate the Naga movement within India's constitutional framework (Srikanth 2005, 1372-77). Yet these measures failed to address fundamental cultural and political demands, including self-determination, recognition of traditional institutions, and

integration of all Naga-inhabited regions (Kikon 2019, 4-9). The 1997 ceasefire between the Government of India and the NSCN-IM and the subsequent 2015 Framework Agreement reignited hopes for resolution; however, the exclusion of multiple factions, the opacity of negotiations, and limited grassroots participation have reinforced political deadlock and fostered distrust within Naga communities (Longkumer 2020, 5-7).

This enduring uncertainty has profound consequences not only for governance and security but also for the cultural sustainability of the Naga people. Amid unresolved conflict, shifting political discourses, and the pressures of globalization, Naga identity – including rituals, oral traditions, and knowledge systems – faces continuous negotiation and adaptation. This precarious condition, termed here as '*cultural uncertainty*', reflects the contested and fragile nature of Indigenous practices in a world marked by generational disorientation and the commodification of culture. The lack of emphasis on cultural rights – the collective rights of Indigenous peoples to preserve, safeguard, and promote their heritage, language, and institutions (UNDRIP 2007) – reveals a critical gap in both policy and scholarly discourse.

Naga culture, though diverse and rooted in oral narrative, agricultural customs, sacred geography, and traditional law, now encounters tensions between historical values and contemporary political, social, and technological transformations. Education, urbanization, and digital engagement have contributed to generational divides, while peace processes often address culture in administrative or symbolic terms, neglecting its dynamic, political, and living nature (Karlsson 2011, 6). Sustainable peace, therefore, cannot be realized without acknowledging cultural dimensions. Political negotiations addressing integration and disarmament remain incomplete if they do not engage with the cultural foundations of Naga identity, particularly the voices of women, youth, and traditional institutions, which are frequently marginalized. In this context, Naga culture becomes not merely a heritage to conserve but a site of struggle, adaptation, and meaning-making in response to systemic instability (Smith 2019, 1-6).

This study investigates how Naga identity is being reimagined amidst longstanding political stalemate, examining the preservation and reformulation of traditional practices and assessing whether contemporary peace architecture adequately represents culture-oriented demands. Through qualitative methods, including interviews, narrative analysis, and community-level observation, the paper explores the lived experiences of cultural negotiation in modern Naga society and advocates for a peace process grounded in cultural rights, Indigenous agency, and a flexible vision of identity under conditions of uncertainty.

II.   CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study approaches the Indo-Naga political impasse through the interconnected concepts of Naga identity, cultural sustainability, cultural uncertainty, and cultural rights, situated within the theoretical orientations of protracted social conflict (PSC)**,** peacebuilding**,** decolonial perspectives, and Indigenous identity frameworks. Together, these perspectives provide a multidimensional lens to examine how identity is negotiated, traditions are preserved or contested, and rights are upheld or denied in the dynamic terrain of the 'Indo-Naga' peace process.

Naga Identity

Naga identity is both historical and constructive, shaped by collective memory, political mobilization, and cultural resilience. Early expressions of political consciousness, such as the 1929 memorandum of the Naga Club and the subsequent formation of the Naga National Council (NNC) with its 1947 declaration of independence, highlight the enduring centrality of autonomy in Naga self-understanding (Means 1966, 290-313; Ngaihte 2014, 25-30). Religious transformation, particularly the spread of Christianity, played a pivotal role in catalyzing inter-tribal mobilization and reshaping a shared sense of belonging at village and regional levels (Longvah 2017, 121-39).

Identity is further anchored in tribal loyalties, shared struggles, sacred landscapes, oral traditions, and customary law. Yet, while often projected as politically unified on the international stage, Naga society remains deeply fragmented along tribal and clan lines (Chasie 2005, 253-64). Colonial rule and missionary interventions added new registers of affiliation through Christianity and English literacy, which at once fragmented communities and enabled new forms of collective consciousness (Baruah 2003, 321-38). From the post-1947 period onwards, a pan-Naga nationalist sentiment emerged, yet it has continually been challenged by divergent visions of political identity, territorial aspirations, and cultural belonging.

These divergences reflect the complexity of what it means to "be Naga" in political as well as cultural terms. For some, the struggle has centered on full sovereignty and independence from India; for others, it has taken the shape of seeking greater

autonomy within the Indian constitutional framework. Still others have prioritized tribal or ethnic affiliations, at times placing these loyalties above the idea of a unified pan-Naga identity. Such competing visions are not merely abstract disagreements but are grounded in lived experiences of displacement, historical grievances, and differential exposure to state structures and global modernity. They manifest in contrasting preferences for governance models – ranging from the continuation of customary institutions to integration within modern state systems – and in varied claims to territory and belonging. Recognizing this plurality underscores that Naga nationalism is not a monolithic project but a dynamic field of negotiation, where unity and fragmentation coexist and shape the contours of both identity and political aspiration. This study views Naga identity as dynamic rather than fixed – constantly negotiated through displacement, resistance, and everyday cultural practice (Smith 2019, 9-11). Among younger generations, this process increasingly involves re-imagining identity through music, digital expression, language revitalization, and creative reinterpretations of heritage.

Cultural sustainability

Cultural sustainability refers to the capacity of communities to preserve, adapt, and transmit their practices, knowledge systems, and governance structures across generations, even under conditions of political conflict, globalization, and modernizing pressures (Thong 2016, 33–50; Bodhi and Jojo 2019; Goswami 2017, 13-37). It emphasizes not static preservation but dynamic adaptation, where older forms are revitalized and new ones are created in response to changing technologies, generational aspirations, and socio-political realities.

In the Naga context, cultural sustainability is closely tied to cultural rights, understood as the collective entitlements of Indigenous peoples to protect, practice, and develop their heritage, languages, and institutions, while actively participating in decisions that shape their cultural life (UNDRIP 2007). These rights encompass oral traditions, clan-based governance, sacred geographies, land tenure systems, agricultural rituals, and customary law – all of which continue to define Naga identity and political consciousness (Longvah 2017, 121-39). This study treats Naga culture as a living and adaptive system, where practices, rituals, and knowledge are continually reinterpreted and renegotiated in the face of political ambivalence, state interventions, and social transformations. Sustainability here means resilience and renewal, ensuring that cultural dignity endures not merely as heritage but as a dynamic foundation for collective identity and self-determination.

Cultural Uncertainty

The concept of cultural uncertainty captures the precariousness and ambiguity surrounding the continuity, transmission, and legitimacy of traditional practices in the midst of generational shifts, political indecision, and the commodification of culture (Karlsson 2011, 6; Smith 2019, 1–6). Historically, colonial interventions, Westernization, and expanding trade disrupted Indigenous institutions, generating tensions between the preservation of local epistemologies and the pressures of modernity (Thong 2016, 33–50). In more recent times, militarized state interventions such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), 1958 and contested political projects around the reunification of Naga ancestral territories have deepened inter-ethnic divisions and compounded this sense of uncertainty (Salvin, Longvah, and Das 2017, 348-58).

In Nagaland, prolonged conflict, out-migration, and educational homogenization have contributed to generational disconnections, while church-led moral reforms and urban influences have accelerated fears of cultural erosion. Concerns over the fading of language, ritual, and customary law are particularly acute in rural areas, where continuity depends heavily on intergenerational transmission (Karlsson 2011, 227–29). Cultural uncertainty thus emerges as both a symptom and a consequence of political stagnation: the failure to achieve settlement erodes institutional and psychological security, leaving younger generations to negotiate multiple and often conflicting identity registers without affirmation through a legitimate peace (Smith 2019, 1–6).

Cultural Rights and Indigeneity

Cultural rights, as articulated in instruments such as UNDRIP (2007) and ILO Convention No. 169, refer to the collective entitlements of Indigenous peoples to their languages, traditions, lands, knowledge, and institutions. For the Nagas, these rights are central to demands for autonomy, self-government, and belonging. Yet, in practice, state approaches often reduce culture to symbolic markers – costume, festivals, or heritage – while marginalizing Indigenous authority over land, resources, and customary institutions (Simpson 2020, 35–37). This research asks whether the Indo-Naga peace process has adequately engaged with cultural rights, or whether Indigenous governance structures such as village councils and customary courts are sidelined in favor of homogenizing national discourses.

Long-Term Social Challenge and Peacebuilding

The theory of Protracted Social Conflict (PSC) (Azar 1990) offers an important framework for interpreting the Indo-Naga conflict. PSC highlights how struggles are not merely about material resources or territory but stem from unmet needs for identity, recognition, and cultural security. Such conflicts become intergenerational, characterized by mistrust, fractured social integrity, and enduring prejudice (Azar 1990, 5-11). The Naga case exemplifies how unresolved negotiations perpetuate cultural as well as political struggles. Building on this, the study engages hybrid theories of peacebuilding that critique the liberal peace model. These emphasize inclusive reconciliation, cultural restitution, and regeneration of Indigenous institutions rather than top-down settlements (Sarbahi 2014, 1470-80). This view aligns with decolonial and Indigenous perspectives that advocate for centering local agency, plural epistemologies, and cultural dignity in peace processes (Bodhi and Jojo 2019).

From a theoretical perspective, the PSC framework draws on peace and conflict studies, decolonial perspectives, and Indigenous identity frameworks. Peace and conflict scholarship highlights how ceasefires and political settlements often fail to produce lasting peace when local social and cultural realities are ignored (Kolas 2011, 781-92; Sarbahi 2014, 1470-58). Decolonial perspectives interrogate state-centered paradigms of sovereignty, integration, and militarized governance, foregrounding Indigenous epistemologies and cultural agency (Bodhi and Jojo 2019; Peters 2006, 11-15). Indigenous identity frameworks emphasize the dynamic and negotiated nature of collective identity in multi-ethnic and postcolonial contexts, particularly when intersecting with religion, governance, and intergenerational knowledge transmission (Longvah 2017, 121-39; Wouters 2015, 121-51).

Positioned within existing scholarship, this study addresses three key gaps. First, while the literature examines political negotiations, ceasefires, and insurgency dynamics, the cultural dimensions of peace and identity preservation remain underexplored (Kolas 2011, 781–92). Second, few studies focus on lived experiences of cultural negotiation, including the perspectives of women, youth, and traditional institutions (Wouters 2015, 121–51). Third, despite analyses of Naga historical and religious transformations, there is limited work connecting cultural sustainability to political stalemate and peacebuilding strategies (Longvah 2017, 121–39; Thong 2016, 33–50).

Based on this conceptual positioning, the study proposes a framework where cultural sustainability mediates the relationship between political stalemate and Naga identity. The framework proposes that:

1. Political stalemate and the limited, selective inclusion of civil society and traditional institutions in peace negotiations generate cultural uncertainty by weakening traditional governance, disrupting knowledge transmission, and fragmenting social cohesion.

2. Cultural rights and Indigenous agency act as stabilizing factors, enabling communities to maintain and adapt their practices despite political and generational pressures (UNDRIP 2007; Simpson 2020).

3. Identity reconstruction emerges as a dynamic process, where communities creatively negotiate between tradition and modernity, generating adaptive strategies of cultural survival and renewal.

This framework thus allows the study to analyze how Naga communities actively engage with and reshape their cultural practices within a politically constrained environment, emphasizing that sustainable peace is inseparable from the recognition and protection of cultural rights. By centering culture as a core component of peacebuilding, this study addresses a significant gap in both conflict studies and Indigenous scholarship, offering an approach that integrates cultural, political, and social dimensions in the analysis of the 'Indo-Naga' conflict.

III. HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

The history of the Naga people is profoundly shaped by survival, struggle, and the assertion of political identity. Situated in the northeastern frontier of the Indian subcontinent, the Nagas comprise over thirty distinct tribes, each with its own language, customs, and systems of governance. Prior to colonial intrusion, Naga communities were organized through clan-based, decentralized political orders. Governance was anchored in customary law, oral traditions, and sacred territorialities (Karlsson 2011, 5-11). While these units were autonomous, their interactions were sustained through inter-tribal trade, ceremonial exchange, and indigenous diplomatic practices, rather than by any overarching pan-Naga political structure.

Colonial and Postcolonial Trajectories C

The Naga world was profoundly disrupted by British expansion in the nineteenth century. Through punitive expeditions and administrative boundary-making, sections of Naga-inhabited areas were absorbed into the Naga Hills District of Assam. Yet significant parts of the population remained administratively isolated – protected under the Inner Line Regulation or left partially independent. This reinforced the image of the Nagas as a people of the borderlands (Baruah 2003, 321-38).

The early twentieth century witnessed the emergence of modern political consciousness, crystallized in the formation of the Naga Club in 1918. Its historic petition to the Simon Commission in 1929 famously urged that the Nagas be left out of any future Indian Union (Chasie 2005, 253-64). With the rise of the Naga National Council (NNC) under Angami Zapu Phizo after World War II, the assertion of sovereignty became explicit. On 14 August 1947, one day before India's independence, Naga independence was declared, setting the stage for one of South Asia's longest armed struggles. India's response combined military suppression with constitutional measures of accommodation, deepening the cycle of conflict.

Political Arrangements and Their Limits

Several political arrangements sought to contain or resolve the conflict, though none addressed the historical and cultural aspirations of the Naga people in full.

Statehood (1963): Nagaland was carved out as a state of the Indian Union, formally recognizing the region politically. However, this move excluded Naga-inhabited territories in Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and Assam, and subjected customary economies to the framework of Indian law. For many nationalists, it fell short of their vision of sovereignty (Kikon 2019, 65-72).

Shillong Accord (1975): Signed between a faction of the NNC and the Government of India, the Accord required unconditional acceptance of the Indian Constitution. It was vehemently opposed by other groups, leading to the emergence of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN). Internal rifts within this organization later gave rise to NSCN (IM) and NSCN (K) in the 1980s. The Accord, instead of unifying, deepened fragmentation (Kolas 2011, 781-92).

Ceasefire Agreement (1997): The formal ceasefire between the Government of India and NSCN (IM) initiated a new era of negotiations. While it created space for dialogue, it also generated complexities: competing claims of leadership, proliferation of rival groups, and militarization of civilian spaces under the guise of peace (Longkumer 2020, 22-24).

Framework Agreement (2015): Celebrated as a "historic" breakthrough between the Government of India and NSCN (IM), the Framework Agreement remains opaque in content. The exclusion of other Naga groups, civil society organizations, and women's voices has raised concerns regarding legitimacy and transparency. The process remains stalled, plagued by distrust, political fatigue, and uncertainty over the future.

The Contemporary Stalemate

Today, the 'Indo-Naga' peace process finds itself in a state of paralysis. Divisions among Naga political groups, India's reluctance to concede a separate constitution and flag, and the absence of inclusive participatory mechanisms involving women, youth, and civil society undermine progress (Baruah 2003). The fragmentation of leadership has diluted bargaining power, leaving each group to assert its own claim to legitimacy (Longkumer 2020, 11-13). Simultaneously, militarization persists through surveillance, arbitrary arrests, and the continued enforcement of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA).

As of April 1, 2025, the Government of India extended the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) in Nagaland for an additional six months, designating certain areas as "disturbed" under Section 3 of the Act. This extension reflects ongoing security concerns and the exercise of special powers by the armed forces in these regions. The following districts are entirely covered under AFSPA: Dimapur, Niuland, Chümoukedima, Mon, Kiphire, Noklak, Phek, and Peren. Additionally, 21 police station areas across five districts are partially covered under AFSPA: Kohima District: Khuzama, Kohima North, Kohima South, Zubza, and Kezocha; Mokokchung District: Mangkolemba, Mokokchung-I, Longtho, Tuli, Longchem, and Anaki 'C'; Wokha District: Bhandari, Champang, and Ralan; Zunheboto District: Ghatashi, Pughoboto, Satakha, Suruhuto, Zunheboto, and Aghunato; Longleng District: Yanglok. The districts of Tuensang, Shamator, and Tseminyu are entirely free from AFSPA coverage. Meluri district, inaugurated on February 22, 2025, was initially not included but was later declared a "disturbed area" under AFSPA in a notification dated April 1, 2025 (Ministry of Home Affairs 2025; The Morung Express 2025; NewsOnAir 2025; Press Trust of India 2025).

The stalemate is not only political but also cultural. The erosion, distortion, or commodification of indigenous traditions – festivals, land-based rituals, oral narratives, and customary laws – threatens the very foundations of Naga identity. State discourses and external cultural economies have further alienated these practices from their original meanings. The absence of cultural justice in the peace process emerges as a critical gap. The cultural survival of the Nagas is inseparable from their historical experiences of trauma, resistance, and resilience. Without addressing the cultural dimensions of conflict, the peace process risks reproducing the same alienation it seeks to overcome. Reimagining Naga identity, therefore, requires situating cultural sustainability at the heart of political negotiations, ensuring that peace is not merely the cessation of violence but the renewal of community, memory, and dignity.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research framework grounded in decolonial and Indigenous methodologies, placing priority on the lived experiences, oral traditions, and cultural knowledge systems of the Naga people. Such an approach foregrounds relationality, community engagement, and narrative depth, ensuring that Naga perspectives remain central in examining how identity and cultural sustainability are negotiated amidst the political uncertainties of the Indo-Naga peace process. Ethnographic sensitivity and narrative inquiry guide the overall design, enabling a holistic understanding of cultural practices as they are remembered, reinterpreted, and contested in everyday life.

A qualitative case study design was adopted because it allows for an in-depth and context-sensitive exploration of identity, cultural resilience, and community agency in a conflict-affected setting. This design is particularly suited to complex social phenomena where cultural continuity, political struggle, and negotiations of belonging are deeply intertwined. Fieldwork was conducted in Kohima District and neighboring areas of Nagaland, spanning rural villages and semi-urban settlements. These sites were selected for their intra-community diversity, historical significance in the Naga movement, and engagement with cultural practices that remain central to community life.

Participants were identified through purposive and snowball sampling in order to include diverse voices and experiences. Elders, youth leaders, student activists, women leaders from community organizations, church representatives, urban women, and return migrants were among those engaged in the study. Their participation ensured that multiple generational, gendered, and political perspectives on culture and identity were represented.

Data collection combined several qualitative methods. Semi-structured interviews provided space for individuals to share personal narratives and reflections on identity, while narrative analysis centered oral traditions, testimonies, and cultural stories as repositories of memory, trauma, and resilience. Participant observation involved immersion in community life through attendance at festivals, rituals, church meetings, and youth forums, creating opportunities to witness how traditions are practiced, redefined, or contested in the present. Document analysis further complemented these methods by examining archival records, peace accords, government documents, newspapers, and civil society publications, which together illuminated the political discourses framing the Indo-Naga process.

Ethical integrity was central to the research process. Informed consent – both verbal and written – was obtained, confidentiality was safeguarded, and anonymity was ensured when requested. The study was guided by Indigenous research ethics, emphasizing relational accountability, non-extractive knowledge practices, and community benefit. By embedding these principles, the methodology not only enabled empirical inquiry but also affirmed cultural justice, amplifying Naga voices in the search for sustainable peace.

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Gender, Generations, and Cultural Negotiations

Culture in Naga society is not static; it is continually negotiated through gendered and intergenerational dynamics. Women, historically excluded from formal leadership roles, have nonetheless been crucial cultural custodians, preserving oral traditions, folk songs, and food ways that form the fabric of everyday identity. Their marginalization within tribal councils and cultural institutions has been persistently challenged by women's organizations, which have emerged as powerful advocates for gender justice and cultural preservation (Nongbri 1988, 71-82). Alongside gendered tensions, intergenerational differences also mark the cultural landscape. Elders often lament the erosion of traditional values, while younger generations resist the rigidity of strict custom, seeking ways to adapt tradition to contemporary realities. Yet this creative friction itself reflects cultural sustainability, as youth navigate their roots while carving out new pathways, signaling both continuity and change.

Rituals, Language, and Land

Ritual, language, and land continue to anchor cultural practice, though each faces significant strain. Language loss remains one of the most pressing challenges: while older generations retain fluency in tribal languages, younger people, particularly in urban areas, increasingly rely on Nagamese, English, or Hindi. In response, churches, student unions, and diaspora networks have undertaken revitalization initiatives through storytelling, community radio, and digital media. Ritual practices tied to agricultural cycles, clan honor, and ancestral territories have also been reshaped; in some communities, Christian liturgies have displaced traditional land rites, while in others, efforts to record and revive these rituals function as acts of resistance and affirmation of identity.

Land, moreover, is not merely material property but a sacred repository of belonging, kinship, and responsibility. State policies of extraction, privatization, and urban expansion have disrupted customary land tenure systems, undermining both livelihoods and the cultural meanings attached to territory. The erosion of ancestral authority over land thus represents not only economic loss but also cultural dislocation, weakening the relational cosmology through which identity and survival are grounded.

Cultural Rights and Political Processes

These cultural negotiations unfold against the backdrop of a prolonged peace process that has remained state-centered and militarized, with limited attention to cultural autonomy or Indigenous rights. Peace agreements and dialogue frameworks have overwhelmingly prioritized territorial and constitutional solutions, leaving unaddressed the fundamental rights of Nagas to preserve, practice, and institutionalize their cultural heritage. International regimes such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007) and ILO Convention No. 169 recognize collective rights to cultural institutions, languages, knowledge systems, and ancestral territories, yet the Indian state has largely approached the Naga question as an administrative and security matter rather than one of cultural justice (Longkumer 2020, 1-5).

The 2015 Framework Agreement, celebrated as a breakthrough, remains opaque and has offered little clarity on issues such as language revitalization, protection of customary law, or the independence of cultural organizations. Instead, peace efforts often reduce culture to tokenistic displays – festivals, dances, crafts – while failing to integrate cultural rights into governance structures (Simpson 2020). Civil society actors – tribal councils, women's groups, churches, and youth organizations – who embody and transmit much of Naga culture, remain sidelined from formal negotiations (Chasie 2005, 253-64). Exclusion of these actors, along with rival political factions, has deepened distrust, fractured representation, and left cultural claims vulnerable to co-option or erasure.

Meanwhile, development projects – roads, mining, and educational reforms – frequently proceed without cultural consultation, resulting in the displacement of ritual sites, privatization of communal land, and disruption of oral knowledge systems. In this way, modernization threatens to further erode already fragile cultural forms. When peace is pursued without cultural grounding, it risks replicating colonial hierarchies that historically dismissed Indigenous governance, knowledge, and spirituality. For the Nagas, the struggle has never been solely about sovereignty; it has always been equally about safeguarding a way of life rooted in sacred geography, relational cosmology, and customary morality.

Towards Culturally Rooted Peace

The absence of cultural recognition in the peace process has fostered fatigue and distrust, particularly among youth navigating cultural ambiguity in an unresolved political landscape. A peace that sidelines cultural rights cannot be transformative; it remains fragile, top-down, and alienating. As Wouters (2015, 147) argues, cultural rights are not symbolic luxuries but fundamental to decent living, social cohesion, and post-conflict recovery. Protecting customary land tenure, incorporating Indigenous education, and recognizing traditional institutions within governance structures are not peripheral demands but central to sustaining Naga identity and aspirations.

The findings of this study suggest that peace in the Indo-Naga context must be reimagined as more than a territorial or constitutional settlement. It must be reframed as a process that acknowledges cultural rights as pillars of justice and survival. Decolonization here cannot be reduced to borders and sovereignty alone; it must also address memory, language, ritual, and intergenerational continuity. Only a culturally rooted peace process – participatory, inclusive, and informed by Indigenous paradigms of governance and justice – can respond to the resilience, creativity, and agency through which the Nagas continue to sustain their identity amidst political stalemate.

VI.   REIMAGINING NAGA IDENTITY

The Indo-Naga peace process has, for decades, lingered on fragile ceasefires and unresolved negotiations. While milestones such as the 1997 ceasefire and the 2015 Framework Agreement attempted to stabilize the conflict, the process has remained dogged by elite-driven negotiations, exclusion of key stakeholders, and an inability to resolve fundamental questions of sovereignty, territorial integration, and constitutional recognition (Kikon 2019, 19-25). Yet, beneath this political stalemate lies an underexplored dimension: the threat to the sustainability of Naga culture.

Mainstream peacebuilding discourses tend to privilege legal and institutional arrangements while neglecting the cultural dimensions of the communities most affected by conflict. In the Naga context, this neglect has intensified a condition of "cultural uncertainty" – where traditional practices, knowledge systems, and indigenous identities struggle to maintain continuity and relevance (Karlsson 2011, 21). Processes of modernization, internal migration, generational change, and state-centric narratives have further eroded cultural foundations such as oral traditions, customary law, clan-based governance, and sacred geography (Longkumer 2020, 10-15). Communities have shown resilience in protecting rituals, land relations, and indigenous governance, yet their role in shaping the future of the Naga nation remains increasingly marginalized. This failure to recognize cultural rights in formal negotiations raises pressing questions about the legitimacy and sustainability of any future settlement. Unless community agency, indigenous worldviews, and intergenerational memory are woven into political negotiations, peace risks becoming institutionally complete but culturally hollow.

Amid these conditions, Naga communities continue to negotiate identity – grappling with what it means to be Naga, how much of the past should be preserved, and how new forms of belonging might be imagined in changing circumstances. Rather than viewing culture as a fixed inheritance, identity emerges as a lived, dynamic practice – shaped by contestation, adaptation, and creativity across generations. This resonates with the study's findings, which demonstrate that Naga identity is neither static nor purely resistant, but continuously reimagined through cultural revival, reinterpretation, and innovation.

For younger Nagas, identity formation increasingly takes creative and digital forms. Indigenous language learning, oral history projects, and youth-led artistic production in music and visual arts draw upon tribal motifs and collective memory to reanimate cultural heritage. Even events such as the Hornbill Festival – often critiqued for commodification – function as spaces where hybrid identities are performed and renegotiated. Meanwhile, returning migrants from mainland India or abroad often re-engage with cultural roots while simultaneously bringing cosmopolitan ideas, generating both tensions and innovations as traditional practices are re-contextualized within global discourses of indigeneity and identity politics. These processes of negotiation mirror the dynamism of identity-making documented in the findings, where adaptation and cultural innovation have become as significant as resistance in defining Naga identity (Longkumer 2020, 23-27).

Traditional institutions such as village councils, clan elders, and tribal bodies continue to exercise cultural authority, managing land tenure, dispute settlement, and ritual practices (Means 1966, 290-313). However, their authority is increasingly questioned by younger generations who often perceive them as patriarchal, opaque, or resistant to change. At the same time, these institutions are not static. In some areas, councils have begun to incorporate women's voices, adapt to constitutional frameworks, or digitize community records. Collaborative efforts between councils, church leaders, and cultural associations have also fostered oral history projects, intergenerational knowledge-sharing, and language revitalization programs. These shifts highlight the hybrid forms of adaptation and resilience that the findings identified as central to sustaining cultural agency in times of political uncertainty.

Yet a critical paradox remains: without official recognition in peace negotiations or integration into state legal systems, these traditional institutions remain symbolically powerful but structurally weak. Their exclusion from decision-making not only undermines the possibility of establishing a culturally rooted peace framework but also reinforces the cultural alienation already noted by community respondents. As the findings demonstrate, this top-down exclusion has deepened distrust and fractured representation, particularly among youth and women who carry forward cultural renewal in practice but remain sidelined in politics (Chasie 2005, 253-64).

Reimagining Naga identity, therefore, is inseparable from the broader search for peace. It involves not only safeguarding cultural fragments but integrating indigenous worldviews, evolving practices, and intergenerational creativity into political processes. This aligns with the discussion's argument that peace, if stripped of cultural justice, becomes structurally weak and hollow in meaning. A hybrid approach – where bottom-up practices of cultural resilience intersect with top-down frameworks of negotiation – offers the possibility of a more durable settlement. Only by recognizing culture not as an

accessory but as the very foundation of peace can negotiations move beyond hollow agreements and toward a future that is both legitimate and inclusive (Wouters 2015, 148-52).

VII. CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the sustainability of Naga identity and culture is inseparable from the broader Indo-Naga peace process. While milestones such as Nagaland's statehood in 1963, the Shillong Accord (1975), the 1997 ceasefire, and the 2015 Framework Agreement sought to stabilize the conflict, they largely sidelined the core concerns of cultural rights and recognition. The findings indicate that Naga identity is fluid, conflictual, and continually reimagined as communities – particularly youth, women, and returnees – actively negotiate ancestral knowledge, customary governance, rituals, and land relations within changing social and political realities.

Cultural sustainability, as the study demonstrates, is inherently political. Decades of exclusion from formal negotiations, state-centered policies, and modernization pressures have eroded language, rituals, and governance structures, reinforcing cultural uncertainty. Peace cannot be durable if it remains limited to elite-level agreements or constitutional settlements. Rather, meaningful reconciliation requires culturally grounded, participatory processes that recognize customary institutions, protect ancestral territories, and support intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Ultimately, this research underscores that safeguarding Naga identity demands more than political solution – it requires a peace process rooted in cultural dignity, plural representation, and decolonial engagement with Indigenous knowledge. Sustainable peace is achieved not only through agreements over territory or sovereignty but through the active affirmation of cultural rights, community agency, and intergenerational continuity, ensuring that the future of the Naga nation is built upon both heritage and innovation.

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